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Traveling with Joel

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In Memoriam
Joel Kovel

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The lives of many of the world's great intellectuals are tragically bereft of autobiographical accounts of their lives. We are fortunate that this is no longer true in the case of the iconoclastic bellwether of ecosocialism, Joel Kovel. But this is in no way suggesting that the ecosocialist movement is Kovel's only singular achievement. Far from it. Kovel's contributions to a critique of psychiatry, of political theory and of the ruination of the biosphere have been pathfinding, highly revered, and reviewed and debated in highly prestigious journals and publications such as *The New York Times*. His work with revolutionaries around the globe (including sojourns in Nicaragua during the Sandinista revolution as just one of many examples), and his achievements alongside some of the leading political activists worldwide have secured for Kovel a premier place in the history of the left. But notoriety is not what drives Kovel's work. What drives Kovel's work is a relentless struggle for social justice, even if that means personal vilification and isolation from the those who have the power to reward compliance financial security and academic prestige.

In this short commentary, I seek to reflect the essence of Kovel's life through a reading of his last published work, his autobiography, *The Lost Traveller's Dream*. What makes this autobiography stand out from others of similar genre is Kovel's own steadfast example of personally demonstrating through his actions those beliefs and political convictions which have cost him mightily in terms of personal friendships, academic colleagues, and a secure academic position. Such personal sacrifice does not lead Kovel to fall into the trap made by less honest writers of mounting a triumphalist defense of one man's personal victimization as a result of daring to challenge the regnant horrors of capitalism and its hydra-headed tentacles which have reached inside every state institution in the country, savaging everyday life in the process. Kovel is much too sagaciously introspective and searingly self-critical to walk that path. *Lost Traveller's Dream* is as much a form of self-analysis as it is exposition. The honesty of the author

can evince at times a jarring response in the reader, no doubt resulting from the infrequency of which one encounters such transparency.

Lost Traveller's Dream documents the intellectual, political and spiritual journey of one of the world's most important and iconoclastic intellectuals and a founder of one of the most important social movements of our times—the ecosocialist movement. It is an extraordinary account of a life journey, that at times assumes mythic proportions, an account that is fiercely intimate and freighted with such remarkable nuances of memory that at times it reads like a novel that cannot be put down. Yet it is simultaneously an account that ardently captures the complex interconnections between politics and biography, the material and the spiritual, grace and the soul, history and spirit.

Kovel's account of his life reveals an intensely vulnerable man, aware at an early age of his percipient intellectual gifts and scientific prowess while at the same time admitting to deep personal insecurities born of a loving yet fractious family upbringing that painfully haunts the author into the present. *Lost Traveller's Dream* illuminates the extent to which memories of love and security mixed with the trauma and isolation that accompanies growing into adulthood can powerfully impact the production of a writer's critical knowledge (and dare we say, the production of desire!) and political proclivities that are ever fomenting in the minds of every human being as well as, in the case of Kovel, one of our greatest analysts of capitalism as a earth-shattering (in the literal sense) world ecology.

Kovel was born into a family of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, fleeing Tsarist Ukraine, (with it's twenty -year draft for all Jewish recruits!) Kovel's father, Lou, who eventually managed to secure a job as an accountant, had escaped Dnepropetrovsk in Ukraine and make the long trek to Williamsburg, Virginia, working at extinguishing street lamps on his way to high school in order to make ends meet. A leftist in his earlier years, during Joel's formative years he had already made a violent turn to the right, even to the point of exhibiting a stirring adulation for Francisco Franco. He was a man who could be unpredictably violent towards his family, including young Joel, yet he nevertheless provided stability and some sense of security to the Kovel family, sacrificing financially for his son to be able to attend Yale. Kovel's mother, Rose, who once blamed Joel for giving her cancer of the breast (which 43 years earlier had apparently begun when Joel was a month old and had to be prematurely weaned), fortunately had a devoted and

loving side to her character, and her impact upon the life of the author is one of the running themes of the book.

Living in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, populated mainly by Jewish immigrants, Kovel attended public school, PS 99 on East 10th street, some of whose students grew up to be household names, such as Allen “Red” Koningsberg, the future Woody Allen, many of whom Kovel remembers. There are few writers that can match Kovel’s style. The *Lost Traveller’s Dream*, rife with poetic metaphors, is a recollection that percolates through a wide filter of memories, allowing him to develop strong characterizations of personalities who shaped his life and various vocations, most notably his parents, aunts (especially his favorite aunt Betty), uncles and other relatives who simultaneously seem both familiar and distant—some, in fact, not unlike characters from a Woody Allen movie.

How did the precocious son of immigrant parents, a young man with prodigious math and science skills, living in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, who graduated from Yale, received his M.D. from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, and a graduate of the Psychoanalytic Institute, Downstate Medical Center Institute, Brooklyn, become a lost traveller who armed himself with a biocentric ethic and love of humanity (as in Paulo Freire’s notion of ‘armed love’) to explore his dream of a better world, eventually to achieve worldwide recognition as the major architect of the revolutionary ecosocialist movement? This is the central theme of *Lost Traveller’s Dream* but there are also many competing themes, equally as intriguing, including Kovel’s developmental journey from what Paulo Freire calls ‘naïve consciousness’ to critical consciousness (or *conscientização* to use Freire’s original word in Portuguese), despite a bourgeois upbringing and Ivy League education. Another compelling theme is the spiritual conversion of the author, a Jew, to Christianity, a conversion which in no way blunted Kovel’s appreciation for manifold aspects of Jewish culture and history. And, of course, the entire memoir is devoted to an unmasking of transnational capitalism as a form of imperialism accompanied by an unrelenting critique of its administrative sentinels which, for Kovel, includes to varying degrees all institutions within the capitalist state, including the medical institutions, the military industrial complex, and, of course, academic institutions, all of which feature in Kovel’s “ruthless criticism of all that exists”. And it is no overstatement to say that Kovel can be sharp-tongued when castigating those whom he feels have abandoned the

struggle for social justice in the service of personal gain, including former friends and colleagues.

Apart from the young Kovel's studies in the sciences, in which he excelled, he developed an interest in Athenian drama (as a result of auditing a class with the magisterial Bernard Knox), the plays of Shakespearean drama (after having played the liminal character of Sir Toby Belch during a university production), works by Chaucer, and a compelling if not devotional interest in artist, poet and philosopher, William Blake, Kovel's "guiding star" whose work remains to this day one of the most dominant influences in his life. As the reader moves from chapter to chapter, literary, political, religious and scientific references abound, woven into a tapestry of personal disclosure that illustrates the staggering breadth of Kovel's polymath intellect. And yet, the author is at the same time able to make complex ideas, if not accessible, then at the very least evocative to the reader who is not necessarily an aficionado of Freud, Marx, Weber, Blake or the dozens of other thinkers whose work Kovel engages throughout his tale. What gives this book an irresistible edge is the intricately intimate way in which Kovel juxtaposes elements of his personal life with those of his various theoretical and political trajectories—and there are many such trajectories, too many to recount in this short Foreword.

However, I would be remiss if I left out this emblematic event from Kovel's life at Yale (under a strictly enforced quota for Jews it need be said), a lecture by Richard Sewall, congregational minister and Professor of English, that piqued Kovel's interest. It so happened that during that lecture Professor Sewall's evocation of the worlds of St. Paul led to a profound moment of revelation for the young Kovel, leading him to a discovery of what Kovel refers to as the selfless love vouchsafed to humans by Grace or Agape.

By the age of 20 Kovel had turned away from physical and mathematical science to medicine (from 1977 till 1983 he was Director of Residency Training, Department of Psychiatry, Albert Einstein College of Medicine where he was also Professor of Psychiatry from 1979–1986). While a resident at Albert Einstein College, Kovel describes a fascinating account of the time he spent with the Reichian analytic movement (sometimes clandestinely after his shift was over) and his work with Dr. Simeon Tropp, formerly a surgeon and one of Wilhelm Reich's closest friends. But fascinating historical accounts frequently turn to horror in brief

descriptions such as the author's experience of wheeling patients through the dank corridors of the infamous Bellevue Hospital to sounds of scurrying rats. Kovel eventually abandoned a career as a psychiatrist in 1986. It was during this time that he began engaging seriously in Christian thought, although not without serious doubt and struggle, not to mention repercussions in his personal life as would be expected of someone having been raised a Jew in a Jewish household. Kovel was eventually called into service within the Presbyterian Church.

Kovel's precociousness in science and medicine, in addition to an commitment to a radical politics that had been fomenting since those tumultuous political times in U.S. politics surrounding the Vietnam War, led him to meet some of the leading scientists (including social scientists) and political activists of his day. During an overseas excursion as a medical student, Kovel's early contact with the riverine people of Suriname led to his interest in dialectical anthropology, which in turn led to a relationship with iconoclastic figures such as Stanley Diamond. Fortuitously this expanded into an Adjunct Professorship of Anthropology at the New School for Social Research which lasted from 1980 to 1985.

Throughout his political formation, Kovel eschewed ideologically rigid sectarian organizations—Maoist, Stalinist, Trotskyist and what he felt to be their pettifogging offshoots—one exception was a short-lived relationship with the Telos group before they became, as he would put it, aligned with the capitalist state. Finding unsurpassable limitations in the work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory—including one of his most respected luminaries, Herbert Marcuse—Kovel found renewed inspiration in war-torn Managua through his contributions to the Sandinista revolution and while serving in Nicaragua was drawn to praxis-oriented work emerging from Christian base communities as well as liberation theology which at the time was being ruthlessly persecuted by John Paul II's Vatican and by the Reagan administration.

As a young man working as steward on the ocean liner, SS United States, Kovel had a chance encounter with Sigmund Freud who was to become one of his idols for a period of time until Kovel's reading of Marx came into unresolvable conflict with Freud's theories. His engagement with the vast corpus of Marx's work helped inspire Kovel's political revelations on the early formation of the national security state at a time when John Foster Dulles and Joe McCarthy were wreaking their most political havoc. Reading

through *Lost Traveller's Dream*, it is difficult not to be impressed by the vast array of well-known intellectuals, political figures and artists that at one time or another became Kovel's personal friends and collaborators. For example, Kovel recounts anecdotes—modest and unembellished—of being invited by the Kennedy administration to attend a speech by John F. Kennedy (on his support of psychiatry) only days before the Cuban Missile Crisis, of listening to a lecture by Fidel Castro, and of meeting some of the most important leftist philosophers of the day, including Raya Dunayevskaya. These appear commonplace throughout the book. During key political events of the time, Kovel appeared omnipresent. Thus, I was hardly surprised to learn that Kovel served as a courtroom defendant of minimalist sculptor, Richard Serra, during a lawsuit involving his Tilted Arc sculpture that the government was trying to remove from the grounds of Federal Plaza.

While holding short-term positions as a Visiting Lecturer at San Diego State in the spring of 1990 and another Visiting Professor position at UCSD in Winter 1993, Kovel's political life had become marinated in the messy world of *realpolitik*, as he ran for US Senate with the Green Party in 1988. Later, in 2000, he sought the party's presidential nomination in Denver, losing to Ralph Nader.

On June 20, 2009, a decade after being appointed Alger Hiss Chair of Social Studies at Bard College, Kovel's academic world came to an abrupt end, one that Kovel anticipated would be hastened by the publication of his 2007 book, *Overcoming Zionism*. Kovel favored a one-state solution to the bloody conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians and, unsurprisingly, his acerbic critique of Zionism and the state of Israel was seamlessly conflated with anti-Semitism, a conundrum that often marked the end of the careers of dissenting professors, even scholars as distinguished as Kovel. Kovel's autobiography unsparingly unearths the hypocrisy of free speech in the academy and the complicity of academic institutions in the crimes of the transnational capitalist state.

Lost Traveller's Dream is a story with colorful and enigmatic characters, many of whom will be recognizable to us regardless of what stage we are at in our journey throughout life. Through each and every page, Kovel is taking us to the Tabard Inn in preparation for a pilgrimage to the heart of capitalism so that we can better understand how our relationship to nature under the capitalist mode of production will continue to reek havoc on all the

intrinsic relationships we will develop in the process of making our way in the world: familial, institutional, spiritual. Such an understanding is of ultimate importance not only for the life of planet earth but for our own redemption as a species.

Kovel recognized that nature proceeds through negation, and its complex, interrelated and enmeshed temporalities cannot be brought into line by the valorization process of capital, whose violent attempts to synchronize natural time and workplace time ultimately disarticulates human beings and nature, resulting in ecosystemic disintegration. Throughout his life, Kovel developed an ecopolitics that enabled him to struggle against the integration of all modes of domination—racial, sexual, gender, class—into human life. His dream of an ecosocialist future has the potential to be realized but requires a praxis of deep ecology based on the intrinsic value of what we find of most worth in our relationship to reality, a value that we must continue to nurture in all aspects of our lives, especially in terms of how we interact in freely associated ways—that is, eco-centrally—with our environment.

I will emphasize one abiding lesson that Kovel has bequeathed to humanity—how to confront and transform capital’s enmity to nature, to comprehend it not just as an economic system but in relation to humanity’s unfinishedness, to our species’ ontological vocation of becoming more fully human in the face of political repression.

As William I. Robinson has noted, a major difference between 20th century fascism and 21st century fascism involves the emergence over past decades of the transnational capitalist class. For Robinson, 20th century fascism involves the fusion of *national capital* with reactionary and repressive political power. But 21st century fascism involves the fusion of *transnational capital* with reactionary political power. Today’s recomposition of the political forces within capitalist globalization reflects our current state. In order to unload the trillions of dollars it has accumulated, the transnational capitalist class has turned to mind-numbing practices of financial speculation, from the pillaging of public budgets, to what Robinson refers to as militarized accumulation – that is, to endless cycles of war, destruction and reconstruction, to “accumulation by repression” (private prisons and immigrant detention centers, border walls, homeland security technologies, etc.), the structural necessity of endless surplus value and profit, and the construction of surveillance state.

Rather than abandon the socialist project in the face of such daunting forces, Kovel sought to transform socialism into ecological socialism, a socialism for our ecologically-fraught times. How the white working class understands its economic entrapment, and how the political class is feeding the turn to the extreme right—especially in the thrall of Trumpism—is one of the major challenges for critical pedagogy but the larger challenge, as Kovel warns, is to foster a more critical understanding of how the economic conditions for all groups is systemically linked to the crisis of transnational capitalism with its ecosystemic breakdowns, its endless cycles of war and its commodification of living labor which has left in its tremulous wake millions of ecological refugees strung across the planet. Kovel began the task of unraveling how overproduction and overconsumption are functionally tied to ecocide, genocide, and epistemicide (the destruction of cosmovisions of indigenous peoples) and how all of these social relations violate the internal relations of sustainable ecosystems, thus irrevocably cleaving humanity from nature, from what Marx called our species-being. This knotty challenge is one that must be taken up, if we are to survive the coming decades. It is first and foremost a pedagogical challenge and it fortunate for us that Kovel is first and foremost a teacher, one of those special critical pedagogues that have traversed the world-historical stage of history and in so doing “troubled the world’s sleep” through following his lost traveller’s dream. The vision embodied in this pathfinding work has become, to use Kovel’s own term, a “prefiguration” of a world-in-the-making, one “scrubbed of dross”. And I would add, a vision that tantalizes us towards a rearticulation of our humanness and nature.

As the reader moves from chapter to chapter, scientific literary, and political, references abound, woven into a tapestry of personal disclosure with an increasingly religious theme that falls away from his Jewish upbringing and toward a Christian calling that represents, for him, the destination of the Lost Traveller’s Dream. Throughout, Kovel is able to make complex ideas accessible and evocative to readers regardless of their familiarity with Freud, Marx, Blake or the dozens of other thinkers he engages throughout his tale. In so doing, he models Paulo Freire’s notion of “armed love,” carefully, and often humorously, teaching what it means to be dedicated to the relentless struggle for social justice, even when that means personal vilification and isolation from those who have the power to reward compliance in the form of financial security, political victory, and academic prestige.

What stands out is Kovel's steadfast example of personally demonstrating through his actions his beliefs and political convictions, at great cost incurred twice at the top of the academic ladder. Such personal sacrifice does not lead him to fall into the trap of mounting a triumphalist defense: one man's personal victimization as a result of daring to challenge the regnant horrors of capitalism and its hydra-headed tentacles that reach inside every state institution in the country, savaging everyday life in the process. Kovel is much too sagaciously introspective and searingly self-critical to walk that path. Instead, *The Lost Traveller's Dream* is as much a form of self-analysis as it is fearless and courageous exposition, rife with jarring honesty.

Any path-breaking journey entails the risk of getting lost, even as in the process one finds oneself learning a great deal from those one never expects to meet. Like Chaucer, Kovel details the panorama of his society—late, disintegrating capitalism—with inspiring hopefulness.

Kovel's achievements have secured for him an honorable place in the history of resistance to corrupt power, while his memoirs open the possibility for others to chart their own path toward the same destination.

Notes

This is an expanded commentary that first appeared as the Preface to *The Lost Traveler's Dream* by Joel Kovel.

Born into a family of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, fleeing Tsarist Ukraine, with its twenty year draft for all Jewish recruits, Living in the Midwood section of Brooklyn. His public school, PS 99 on East 10th street was populated mainly by Jewish students, such as Allen “Red” Koningsberg, the future Woody Allen.

How the white working class understands its economic entrapment is one major challenge for critical pedagogy but the larger challenge is to foster a more critical understanding of how the economic conditions for all groups is linked to the crisis of transnational capitalism.

Bill Robinson notes:

One key difference between 20th century fascism and 21st century fascism is that the former involved the fusion of *national capital* with reactionary and repressive political power, whereas the latter involves the fusion of *transnational capital* with reactionary political power. It is crucial to stress that Trumpism does not represent a break with capitalist globalization but rather the recomposition of political forces as the crisis deepens. If we want to understand political phenomena we must not confuse surface appearance (or discourse) with underlying essence.

The transnational capitalist class has accumulated trillions of dollars that it is finding ever harder to “unload”. In recent years it has turned to mind-boggling levels of financial speculation, to the raiding and sacking of public budgets, and to what I call militarized accumulation – that is, to endless cycles of war, destruction and reconstruction, to “accumulation by repression” (private prisons and immigrant detention centers, border walls, homeland security technologies, etc.), and the construction of a global police state to defend its global war economy from rebellions from below.

But critically, the political class that has been in place for the past three decades is more than bankrupt – it is feeding the turn to the far right. Its brand of identity politics has served to eclipse the language of the working and popular classes and of anti-capitalism. It helps to derail ongoing revolts from below, has helped push white workers into an “identity” of white nationalism and helped the neo-fascist right organize them politically.

Robinson, William I. (2016). Trumpism, 21st Century Fascism, and the Dictatorship of the Transnational Capitalist Class. Rising Powers in Global Governance. December 4. As retrieved from:
<http://risingpowersproject.com/trumpism-21st-century-fascism-dictatorship-transnational-capitalist-class/>

Joel Kovel: Uprooting Capitalism as the Enemy of Nature

But leaving us at Klein's conclusions omits something much more revolutionary, something far more fulfilling. Klein's embrace of populism does not necessarily factor out opposition to capitalism. Her solutions to overcoming capitalism could be a starting point, pointing in the direction cracking capitalism's walls and leading us on a path to a sustainable future. However, her ambiguity over the question of the abolition of capitalism and her dismissal of communist alternatives and history leaves the book, in the final analysis, trapped inside capital's labyrinth, which as Joel Kovel argues, is, *ne plus ultra*, the enemy of nature. Kovel's *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?*, shares a polemical stance with Klein's Capitalism vs the Climate; however, Kovel is far more thoroughgoing in his critique of capital and capitalism. Such an in-depth critique of capitalism, Kovel believes, is necessary for human liberation and an ecologically stable planet. His purpose is to "clarify what capital is and what nature is, to understand capital's enmity to nature, to understand it not just as an economic system but in relation to the entire human project, to see its antecedents, and more importantly, to fathom what can be done about it" (4). These are the very arguments and layout of the book.

Kovel begins by taking us through the grim realities forming the ecological crisis (1-3), the "evolution of an ancient lesion in humanity's relation to nature" (14). Seemingly disconnected events, from the 25 million displaced environmental refugees in 1999 to the \$140 trillion in money-as-capital in 2005, are, in sociological terms, products of society. This is because nature "is an aspect of our being, absolutely essential over if not the whole of it" (14). Moreover, civilization and nature are inextricably linked, though nature can and has existed without human civilization. Any societal action bears impact on the immediate environment, these environments in flux with other environs, and so forth.

But never before has the planet had to bear overproduction and overconsumption on such a scale as today's. When we connect the fragmented events from society, we witness a "nightmare in which the demons released in the progressive domination of nature come back to haunt the master" (16). To sum up: "The current stage of history can be characterized as structured by forces that systemically degrade and finally exceed the buffering capacity of nature with respect to human production, thereby setting into motion an unpredictable yet interacting and expanding set of ecosystemic breakdowns" (23).

For Kovel, a case-study of the 1984 Bhopal, India methyl isocyanate (MIC) chemical leak is enough to find the efficient cause, the initial force with the “property of being able to set other causes into motion” (27), of the ecological crisis. The Union Carbide chemical factory was responsible for unimaginable suffering and fatalities, but leaving blame solely at the site misses the larger picture. The factory made a chemical that was to be sold and the entire purpose of the factory was to create value. The quest for surplus value and profit, then, is the efficient cause in the Bhopal incident. The indictment against capital thus begins.

The “established view” sees as a rational investment, “a way of using money to fruitfully bring together the various functions of economic activity” (38). Instead, Kovel shows that capital tends to degrade the existence of its own production, that it must expand without end in order to exist, and that this leads to a chaotic world-system increasingly polarized between rich and poor that cannot adequately address the ecological crisis (38). Capital has a restless dynamism that drives innovation, efficiency, and new markets. Though capital acts like a virus, “it is humanity living as capital, people who become capital’s personification, that destroys ecosystems” (39). And capital is made possible, realized, by the commodity, the conjunction of use-value and exchange value.

Summarizing very simply, the use-value of a thing can be described as its sensuous qualities (smell, touch, taste, etc.) whereas the exchange value is generalized equivalence (X many oranges are worth X many apples), expressed as quantity and money (for further explanation, see: Capital, Vol. I). Exchange-value is abstract, much like an idea or a number. Now, exchange value points towards value creation, on the road toward profit, and maximizing value requires high prices and low costs. Costs are lowered by cutting the conditions of production (cost of machinery, wages, etc.), of which humans and nature are included. Thus, for something to become surplus value, the qualities of a thing, human and nature included, dissipate as they give way to exchange value, often to what we recognize as money.

As Kovel notes forcefully, this is contrary to the laws of nature. “The actual laws of nature exist in the context of ecosystems whose internal relations are violated by conversion to the money-form” (40). Capital often takes the form of money made to make more money, and stops being capital when it moves from this ceaseless expansion. Any original profit is a starting point for departure. And every quantitative increase of capital “becomes a new boundary, which is immediately transformed into a new barrier” (42).

Capital needs and seeks barriers as a site of growth. Anything that isn't valorized (used to create surplus value, some of which becomes profit) is left as externalities that "become repositories of pollution" (41), this notion very similar to that of Klein's sacrifice zones.

Capital penetrates and degrades both environmental and human life-worlds (52-60) and does so in ever-decreasing circulation time (60), resulting in a time-obsessed, overworked, stressed, and frantic existence (62). We move "from a world regulated by the complex and interrelated temporalities of ecosystems to one in which a single, uniform and linear standard is imposed upon reality and comes to rule it" (62). "The de-synchronization between natural time and workplace time devolves, therefore, into a disarticulation of human being and nature, and is foundational for capital's efficient causation of the ecological crisis" (62). This consumptive net enmeshes the world with no "virtuous and all-knowing capitalist" (78) capable of saving the economy and ecology, there being a whole sect of people who live and die for capital accumulation, ready to move up the ladder as the humble and compassionate are booted below.

An understanding and analysis of ecology grants us vision of a universe, of an existence with amazing possibility, shorn away by capital. As Kovel writes: "the systematic introduction of an ecological vision [relationships and the structures that flow between them] commits us to positing reality as an interconnected web whose numberless nodes are integrated into holistic beings of ever exfoliating wonder" (98). If there were "no-thing," then there would be "none of the differentiation that is the lot of the cosmos in the eons between its alpha and omega points" (99). Therefore, reality is full of "some-things," integral parts of Wholes and these Wholes being integral to more Wholes, and so on. This is not a harmonious relationship – nature proceeds through negation.

As for ecosystems, their integrity relies on differentiation, "the state of being that preserves individuality and connectedness" (115). Ecosystemic disintegration is the separation of elements from the ecosystem, what Kovel denominates as *splitting*. For example, the Bhopal chemical leak caused a splitting from bodily integration. This splitting leads to alienation from integrity.

The capital relation is by definition a splitting system, a process of unceasing accumulation turning use-value into exchange value. It is not an innate outcome, something fundamental to human nature, since great violence was

needed for its establishment. Capital is the “evolution of an ancient lesion in humanity’s relation to nature” (3) stemming from the gendered bifurcation from nature, the control of female bodies, then festering into an establishment of private property and class relations, from which racial and ethnic prejudices emerge and feed upon. Capitalism is different from earlier modes of production in that it converts the sensuous world into abstraction for the purpose of value (135). “The ecological crisis and capital’s exploitation of labor are two aspects of the same phenomenon” (141).

Capital is a spectral apparatus that integrates earlier modes of domination, especially that by gender, and generates a gigantic force field of profit-seeking that polarizes all human activity and sucks it into itself. It produces enormous wealth and poverty, eternal strife, insecurity, ecodestruction, and nihilism. In order to overcome capital we must undergo basic changes in ownership and control of productive resources and our productive powers have to be self-determined, liberated. An understanding, analysis, and scathing critique of capital allows for its indictment as the efficient cause of the ecological crisis. Of course, one needn’t know these figures and principles to fight against capital, as necessity is forcing persons to fight for their survival. But capital is all the more nefarious in that it usurps change and revolutions and utilizes them for its own purposes; an anti-capitalist ground must be established. For this reason, Kovel examines eco-politics, struggles for a sound ecology without an anti-capitalist basis.

The courts and other apparatuses of the capitalist system can produce real and much needed gains, but as a case-study of Al Gore’s liberal environmentalism reveals, industry proves too powerful in its hold on the establishment. Volunteerism, while noble, is too often isolated and focused on individual acts rather than turning to systemic change. It is a piece in our fight for a stable planet, but ultimately it is an eco-politics without struggle. Moreover, technology won’t be the sole element that will save us from the ecological crisis, even if there were some technological miracle (172), but it is part of the way to a better planet. It is currently deeply rooted in profit accumulation; this must change, Kovel argues.

Green economics and other efforts that espouse the recuperative powers of capitalism are too prone to capital; it is a reformist solution that repeats the commodification of nature in all aspects (“these trees are worth this much,” etc.). The Kyoto Protocol relied heavily on the trading of pollution credits, which essentially allowed rich countries to pay the poor so that they may continue polluting; this measure allowed profits to remain untouched.

Co-operatives are an integral component of an ecological socialist future because they allow for employee-ownership of production. Unfortunately, co-ops too suffer under the vicissitudes of capital, making it impossible for co-ops to be reproduced on a large scale today (182). “The problem is to get to that [eco-centric], freely associated ground, in the course of which present ways of production need to be traversed and transformed” (184). But in order to envision this eco-centric future, we must step back from our present ways, we need ecophilosophies.

Ecophilosophies represent comprehensive orientations that combine the understanding of our relation to nature, the dynamics of the ecological crisis, and the guidelines for rebuilding society in an eco-centric way (187).

Deep ecologies attempt to de-center humans from our lordship over nature. Kovel values deep ecology, but notes that it can be “bastardized” by capitalist elites (189) and that it often avoids the question of immigration (as does Klein). Deep ecology does not fully take into account that humanity is a part of nature and that human nature expresses “nature’s transformative power” (188). Deep ecology, Kovel argues, needs to be more human, not less.

Within deep ecology, there is the idea of “bioregionalism,” a sort of “back-to-the-land” movement emphasizing local ecologies. The difficulty in this relies on its definition and management of areas for a global population, some areas insufficient to support populations. In addition, operations by fossil fuel and other toxic industries are wreaking complete havoc on geographies, persons finding their native lands inhabitable. Where would people without their native, now-blighted homes go? The idea is too limiting for a global population.

Eco-feminism is grounded in women’s liberation and ecological justice. Any path out of capitalism must be eco-feminist, since capitalism is a system rooted in patriarchal relations where control of the female body especially leads to property and class relations. Capitalist relations entail gender domination. Some ecofeminisms, however, are not anti-capitalist, and they also sometimes essentialize women’s closeness to nature, a repetition of the “eternal feminine” in a seemingly positive form. It seems that Kovel is calling for explicit anti-capitalism as philosophical movement. The leading proponents of ecofeminism, such as Vandana Shiva, stress the unequal economic situation of our times (Shiva focusing on control of food),

Kovel has little faith in contemporary notions of liberal democracy, since it is bourgeois (upholding capitalist interests) in origin and nature. True democracy is “the power of men and women beyond the notion of property” (200). Progressivism in its expansion of social welfare programs is a step towards , but it isn’t enough, especially when considering that it is capable of turning to fascism (201) or reverting back to capitalist hands. All the efforts thus far provide us with a wealth of knowledge, but much more lies ahead.

Ecosocialism, Kovel believes, is the ecophilosophy needed for our times. “It must be that an important reason co-ops, organic farms, etc., succumb to capital’s force field is the lack of an offsetting belief system which enables them to renounce profitability” (211). The “deployment of values” (212) allows the Amish-like Bruderhof community to live in communal fashion, “the social organization of labor [leaving] capital to die off” (209). The values of the Bruderhof are based in Christian scripture, which isn’t applicable to everyone, and therefore a moral equivalent is needed. Kovel’s solution to staving off capitalist relations is the recognition of *intrinsic value*, “the primary appropriation of the world for each person, in two senses: it is the way we first come to appreciate things and relationships in childhood, and it is, throughout life, the value given to reality irrespective of what we do to reality” (212). Ecological socialism is grounded in eco-centric, intrinsic value, it is a “struggle for use-value and through a realized use-value, intrinsic value” (215); this is a struggle for the “qualitative side of things; not just the hours worked and the pay per hour and benefits, but the control over work and its product, and of what is beyond mere necessity” (216), thereby overturning the balance from exchange-value (quantity) over to use-value (quality). This shift isn’t limited to human endeavours either, since a full realization of the qualitative side of things necessitates an ecologically oriented world-view, lest we conduct ourselves as capitalists and disregard anything non-human as material objects for our gain, ruining ecosystems in the process. Ecosocialism’s emphasis not only on individual but community well-being, on *how* one lives with eco-centric consideration, is similar to the Quechuan idea of *sumac kawsay* , or, *buen vivir* (“good living”).

At this point, Kovel brings up an issue ignored by Klein: socialism and the state. Past socialisms failed because they relied solely on public ownership of production, not free association, which implies “the fullest extension of democracy, with a public sphere and public ownership that is genuinely

collective and in which each person makes a difference” (218). 20th century socialism turned exclusionary through the introduction of one-party states and foreign pressures leaving these states peripheral and dependent on capitalist powers, and with the coupling of non-democratic traditions, left these revolutions to falter.

Rather than abandon the socialist project, Kovel looks to develop socialism into ecological socialism, a socialism for our ecologically-fraught times. Releasing the affirmative, integrative power that is the birthright of every person, that is, freely associated labor, will be “sensuous, deeply gratifying, and non-repressive” (243). In a leap of faith, Kovel wagers that freely associated labor will “generate eco-centric ends” (244), and vice versa; from of these two “mutually generative” (244) processes comes ecosocialism. He elaborates: “The task for ecosocialism is to work consciously with ensembles as they have been thrown forth and to see in them the germ of integral ecosystems to come” (246) (this book embodies the prefigurative principles of ecosocialism in its effort to look past capitalism and restore ecologies to developing rather than deteriorating states; Kovel sees potential that is ultimately hemmed by relations of capital). Kovel situates these “ensembles” under the term “Commons” (246) so that a “notion redolent with history and betrayal” (246), the communal frameworks of previous societies and splitting of these frameworks by capital, may serve as grounds for figuring a new society. Indeed, prefiguration, “a continual process of rediscovery, a restoration of dignity to what ‘has been’ to what is ‘not yet’” (246) will serve as a principle in envisioning and creating a new anti-capitalist society (the derogatory label “has been” can give way to “not yet”). From the Zapatistas in Chiapas to the Zulu *Abahlali baseMjondolo* shack-dwellers, from the “Indy-media” to Cuba’s self-organized organic farms, from bleaching coral reefs to teeming, sometimes unknown species struggling for existence, these contemporary sites of struggle across the world carry the potential to lead us towards eco-centric, free lives. Of course, capitalists being capitalists, nothing will stand in their way of profit-accumulation.

Moving Forward

Thus far, we’ve witnessed how the degree of an anti-capitalist approach can affect solutions in the struggle for a sustainable planet. On the immediate surface, both Klein and Kovel polarize capitalism and ecology. Both authors also sound a call for grassroots, local struggles to take control of their individual and communal affairs with respect to ecological processes rather

than allow domination over nature, what Klein calls “the need to assert the intrinsic value of life” (463). Klein’s book concludes on the note of a “Green New Deal,” wherein which local movements coerce the state to push for more democratic and ecologically sound policy changes. Kovel summarizes:

- “initiatives to build public works whose impact is reduction of dependence upon petroleum, for example, light rail networks; this is not a technological fix, as the technology is already well known; it is a struggle for the state, a political struggle; similar struggles would be toward demanding of the state that it regulate fuel efficiency more strenuously; or stop airport expansion; or get rid of subsidies for fossil fuel extraction, superhighway construction, pipelines, rebates for SUVs, and so on;
- replace these with subsidies for renewable energy development; inducing the development and purchase of high-efficiency autos such as hybrids; methods of efficiency enhancement; promotion of local community initiatives to conserve energy, etc. Ideally, these subsidies should be drawn from heavy taxation of oil superprofits (it clears the mind to realize that the five leading oil companies “earned” \$375 billion in profits in 2006);
- force the state to provide subsidies to workers laid off by the moving away from the carbon economy – a key consideration in overcoming the hostility of traditional labor organizations to environmentalism;
- the above are demands upon the state; there is also need for direct struggles to preserve the integrity of relatively intact ecosystems, such as old growth forests, against the “Clean Development Mechanisms” (CDMs) of the Kyoto regime;
- litigation to force corporations, especially energy corporations, to bear the costs of these transitions” (260).

Both writers also call for Northern (areas with more capital concentration, usually metropolitan) struggles to unite with the far more dire struggles of the Global South. Summarized by Kovel, some of these struggles include:

- “the threat by Indians in Bolivia and Ecuador to commit mass suicide if big oil (including Occidental Petroleum, a company partly held by Al Gore’s family) invades their territory;
- legal action against Chevron by Ecuadoran Indians to try and recoup damages for the terrible pollution and harm done to their lives;
- similar challenges by Inuit from the North Slope in Alaska;

- bans on petro-extraction won by the people of Costa Rica;
- protests by people of the Niger River delta, ranging from militant nudity by women to armed guerrilla movements, all operating under the outrageous assumption that the wealth under the ground should be under the control of the people who live on the ground;
- and, finally, further linking North and South and placing the struggle against petro-capital on an ecosocialist path, the antiwar and anti-imperialism movements” (261).

Klein’s solutions to the climate crisis stop at localism; that is, the climate crisis can be solved by local movements that press for democratic, sustainable policy measures across a global theatre, which is desperately needed of course. But what to do with the dominant system that quantifies anything that can be made into surplus-value, that expands without limit (the economy) and its arm that legitimizes and enforces these activities (the political sphere, the state)? Solutions to the climate crisis like the Kyoto Protocol and the recent, lackluster Conference of the Parties (COP21) resulted in a non-binding treaty[7], going to show how change of the most noble and global sort can be blocked, stampeded over, and trampled by capital. Capital’s logic has been forcefully engrained into individual psyches and corrupts institutions across the globe today. Klein is no exception, and without the deeper anti-capitalist edge that Kovel demonstrates and advocates, an ecologically destructive system is ultimately accepted. Across the world, we hear deep resounding “NO!”’s against capital’s encroachment perverted into “Yes!”’s upholding its ecodesctructive expansion. Kovel’s examination of capital’s logic allows for its mechanism of use-values turned to exchange value to be revealed and reviled. *The Enemy of Nature* possesses great historical reach looking at what’s been and great implications for what could be.

Closing Remarks

A gas leak in the Los Angeles-area community of Porter Ranch produced the most damaging environmental impact for a natural gas leak in history[8], according to a study published by Conley et. al (2016). Methane was the primary greenhouse gas emitted by the corroding SoCal company gas well, first picked up by the olfactory senses of Porter Ranch residents, then confirmed by workers. The gas leaks caused illness amongst the wealthy residents of Porter Ranch prompting California Governor Jerry Brown to

issue a state of emergency on January 6, 2016 (two months after the first reported gas-sniffs), leading to temporary evacuation of the gated community. The gas leaks were stopped for good a month later.

South-east of Porter Ranch lies the community of Boyle Heights, a working-class community in East LA. According to an article by the LA Times[9], the “residents are still living in fear after state toxics officials warned last year that their yards and homes may be contaminated with high levels of lead that can cause disabilities and behavioral problems in children and miscarriages in pregnant women,” with “arsenic and other contaminants in the air” also contributing to a toxic environment. Of the 10,000 properties in the area, only 15 are planned to be cleaned in 2016. Both communities are living in hazardous spaces, but there is a stark contrast in the response by the state. One community receives relief, the other is given crumbs. With increasing gentrification in Boyle Heights, that is, with the displacement of low-income Latinxs, perhaps things will change...

How then, to deal with this disparity? The danger of terms like fat, muscular, smart, etc. is that they produce a worldview that doesn’t move; you and the things and persons around you remain “fixed”. Left unchallenged, this sort of thinking solidifies ever more as one passes through a crumbling education system and media bombardment. The principle of prefiguration steps in here and claims “Ok, that is what it was, what it is, but what can it be?” To witness the phenomena in our lives as fluid breaks us free from a narrow sort of thinking, and is critical to dispelling bigoted notions.

So, let’s go out and make change in all spheres of our lives, from clothing to food to positions in seats of power. But here’s the capitalist kicker, given by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*: “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of society.” We should be careful not to confuse the appearance of change at a particular level with change on a total one. What appears to us today (at least in the West) as the most dynamic and fantastic changes in our collective life takes place primarily in the sphere of computer and information technologies. Yet, as Herbert Marcuse argues in *One Dimensional Man*, the dominant relation of capital remains, things don’t really change, they may even get worse. So what Kovel is calling for is a moment to really think about the issues of our times, and *how* we think about these issues, that is, thinking about thinking, so that we aren’t caught in capital’s double-bind of doing something and upholding the system or doing nothing and letting it run amok.

Eco-systems are now manifesting the overbearing and destructive force of capital. But we are not so powerless, and we in the North are fortunate that the climate crisis doesn't come crashing down on us as it does in the Global South. We have a choice in organizing and realizing ecosocialism or falling into eco-catastrophe. Philosopher Jurgen Habermas wrote that "Behind every fascism is a failed socialism." Today, we witness the rise of fascists from Trump to LePen in France, and the disintegration of states. One line of thought that situates freedom within disciplined social relations based on *egaliberté* and, now developing eco-centric living as a basis, is Marxist-Humanism.